

Penn Traffic Building
319 Washington Street
Johnstown
Cambria County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5388

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PENN TRAFFIC BUILDING

HABS No. PA-5388

Location: 319 Washington St., Johnstown, Cambria County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: Penn Traffic Company.

Present Use: Office building.

Significance: The present six-story brick building was erected in 1908, with additions made in 1924 and 1949 for the Penn Traffic Company, an outgrowth of the Cambria Iron Company's company store. When the present building was completed, its management heralded it as one of the most luxurious department stores in the eastern United States.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: There have been three store buildings on this site. This Penn Traffic building was built in 1908; the Wood, Morrell and Company store was built in 1867; and the Stiles, Allen and Company store was built in 1854.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Deed No. 13-309, dated November 16, 1854, records the sale of the property by Henry and Mary Sutton to the Cambria Iron Company for \$2,500. Cambria Iron built the Wood, Morrell store in 1867. When Cambria Iron was acquired by Midvale Steel and Ordnance in 1916, ownership of the lot passed to Midvale, although by that time Penn Traffic owned the store. Bethlehem Steel acquired Midvale and its holdings in 1923, and sold the Washington Street lot to the Penn Traffic Company on 25 January 1985 for \$215,000 (deed No. 1144-197).
4. Original and subsequent occupants: The present building was erected by Penn Traffic Company, which used it as a department store until 1977. The building is now used for offices for different governmental agencies, and the American Automobile Association.
5. Original plans and construction: The new five-story rectangular building, dedicated on 5 March 1908, measured 280' x 100', with an eleven-bay front on Washington Street.

6. Alterations and additions: A five-story addition, replicating three bays of the original store, was built on the east side of the store in 1924; in 1949 a five-story nondescript red-brick addition was built behind the main store.

B. Historical Context:

Stiles, Allen and Company Store, 1854

Merchants Augustus Stiles and George D. Allen founded Stiles, Allen and Company, a small general store, in early 1854. On June 7, 1854 Stiles and Allen sold the store to George S. King, one of the founders of the Cambria Iron Company. King hired John S. Buchanan to manage the store, which became known as King, Buchanan and Company. The store then became, in effect, the company store, with the Cambria Iron Company issuing scrip to its employees to be redeemed the same as cash. During this time the store was also the company store for the A. J. Haws brick refractory. The original store was an unimposing two-story frame building with a side-gabled roof.

Wood, Morrell and Company Store, 1867

When Wood, Morrell and Company took over the Cambria Iron Company in 1855, the store became Wood, Morrell and Company. In 1867 the small two-story outlet was replaced with an elaborate, three-story building; at this time the concern became a full-service department store. The three-story building, designed by Sloan and Hutton, was composed of a north and a south wing, each L-shaped, and each 101' long. Connecting the two wings and forming the common foot of the L was a single-story first floor. The store frontage was 101', and it was 126' deep. According to a contemporary observer:

The exterior of the building presents a handsome appearance, being a happy combination of architectural designs, symmetrically planned and tastefully executed. (New York Industrial Recorder, 1907)

The building had brick bearing walls and a brick facade, with projecting arches, moldings, and cornices. The hipped slate roof had four cross gables. The main Washington Street facade featured an elaborate iron cornice and large display windows.

When erected, this store sold groceries, hardware, clothing, shoes, and dry goods. In addition to departments for the merchandise, the building contained administrative offices, manufacturing rooms, sleeping rooms for clerks, and private rooms for the manager and superintendent. The entire interior was "finished in the most approved style of workmanship." The stairways, window moldings, and wainscoting were white and yellow ash, white and black walnut, and chestnut; throughout the interior there were "some dozen of costly mantles of singular and

novel finish, being black slate smoothly finished, and so variegated in color as to represent Italian or Grecian marble, granite or brown stone." The building cost was \$100,000, "showing unparalleled liberality on the part of a company, who not only make money, but who give it a wide scope for circulation in the many improvements that they are continually making." (McCormick, "A Sketch of Johnstown..." 1867.)

Penn Traffic Ltd. Store. 1891

This building was heavily remodeled when a new company, the Penn Traffic Limited partnership, was born in 1891. The partnership was composed of seven men, six of whom were from Philadelphia, with one from Johnstown. Stock in the new venture was sold to Johnstown residents for \$2.50 a share. With the formation of Penn Traffic the store was divorced from the Cambria Iron Company; in 1903 the Pennsylvania incorporation laws were changed and the concern changed its name to the Penn Traffic Company.

Part of the new building was apparently sited on the foundations of the old. With a 160' frontage and a 120' depth, it was stylistically very similar to the 1867 building. It had a steel-reinforced brick structural system, and featured an iron cornice and a gable roof. The interior was quite grand, featuring "beautifully carpeted floors, beveled glass mirrors, solid oak paneling, Italian marble and [a] handsome open lattice elevator" (Johnstown Tribune, 5 March 1908).

Addison Hutton may have been the architect of this building. A partner in the firm Sloan and Hutton, designers of the 1867 Wood, Morrell and Company store, Hutton (1834-1916) was no stranger to Cambria Iron. He designed several other buildings for the company, among them the original Cambria Library Association building (1879), the Cambria Club House (1881), offices for the Gautier Works (a subsidiary of Cambria Iron; 1883) and the rebuilt Carnegie Library (1891). He also designed a private residence in Radnor, Pennsylvania, for Daniel Morrell (1879), the general manager of Cambria Iron at the time, and a home in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, for Powell Stackhouse (1882), the assistant general manager of Cambria Iron.

Hutton is also known to have designed large department stores; in Philadelphia, he was responsible for the Cooper and Conrad store (1893), two Strawbridge and Clothier stores (1880 and 1896), and the Mitchell and Fletcher Store (1896). Based on Hutton's close association with the Cambria Iron Company and his expertise in designing department stores, it is not unreasonable to speculate that he may have been responsible for this building. There is, however, no conclusive evidence. (For more information on Hutton, see the report on the Johnstown Public Library, HABS No. PA-5386.)

Two years later, in 1893, an addition was erected directly east of the store. The new addition was 100' long and 75' deep. Stylistically it

was identical to the 1891 building. A fire on August 28, 1905, completely destroyed the building; it was replaced by the present five-story building in 1908.

Penn Traffic Company Store, 1908

By the 1970s this store was the flagship for a seven-store local chain. In its heyday it was heralded as being "unsurpassed in size, beauty and equipment by any retail establishment between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh" (Johnstown Tribune, 5 March 1908). At its opening, an observer noted that:

Taken all in all, the new Penn Traffic building is a tribute to the ability and courage of the men who have designed it and are carrying its construction through. It is now far ahead of the city, and has no counterpart anywhere in the city, and has no counterpart anywhere in the country in a city with less than 150,000 people. It is a credit to Johnstown, and the strongest testimony that could be offered that here in this city we have the foundations for one of the greatest towns in the United States. (New York Industrial Recorder, 1907)

Penn Traffic has played an important role in the history of Johnstown. The first license for a limited commercial class "A" radio station in Johnstown was granted to Penn Traffic on November 23, 1922. The fire of 28 August 1905 was the worst the city had seen; also, the largest burglary ever in the city occurred in 1924 when burglars "slugged the night watchman" and stole more than \$40,000 in cash and jewelry from the store (Johnstown Tribune-Democrat, 18 April 1953).

As the city's largest department store, Penn Traffic reflected the changing styles and manners of Johnstown and the nation. Employee handbooks document the loosening of stringent dress and deportment requirements. Photographs of the store's interiors record the importance of constant "modernization" in the attempt to remain up to date and meet every customer's needs. For examples, a comparison of photographs from the 1930s and the 1960s show that the original interior Ionic columns were made into bulky interior posts, and that signage changed over the years to more "up-to-date" typefaces.

There are several folkloric theories about the origin of the name Penn Traffic. The most common--and the one retold in company brochures and promotional literature--is that the word Penn was chosen because the store was situated near the Pennsylvania Canal and the depot of the Pennsylvania Railroad, both of which used the abbreviation, and Traffic was chosen because one of its definitions is "trade" or "business." Another explanation, which seems to have little basis in fact (the only extant record of this theory is found in the letters column of The

Observer, dated 12 September 1952), is that Penn Traffic originally was supposed to be known as the Penn Trading Company. Just as the 1891 building was completed, with the initials PT already carved into the date stones and all the paper goods already printed, the Penn Trading Company of Philadelphia (the parent company) went broke. This developed into a scandal, and the store's name had to be changed. Penn Traffic was chosen so the date stones would not have to be recarved, and the paper goods would not have to be reprinted.

The history of merchandising concerns along Washington Street is intimately tied with--and parallels--the history of Johnstown itself. The store started when Johnstown was young, became part of the Cambria Iron Company, experienced heady success between the 1890s and the 1930s, then began to decline. While the Penn Traffic Company still exists and is, in fact, a Fortune 500 consumer grocery store retailer, the Washington Street store never reopened after the 1977 flood, a victim of the declining Johnstown economy.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The design of the Penn Traffic Building is similar to many commercial buildings erected in medium-sized American cities throughout this period. It is more subdued than other buildings of the period in Johnstown.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. There have been many modernization projects on the interior of the building, so the majority of the original fixtures have been lost. The exterior, however, is almost identical to the way it appeared after the 1924 and 1949 additions.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The five-story rectangular building is 280' x 100'. The store has a full basement. The front elevation is a continuous facade of tripartite (A-B-A) windows.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete.
3. Walls: The exterior of the ground floor is faced with ashlar limestone, with glazed display windows on the front facade. Limestone pilasters separating the show windows featured reliefs of the Penn Traffic logo and decorated capitals. A molded limestone stringcourse separates the second and ground floors. The second, third, and fourth floors are faced with red brick. A limestone stringcourse separates the fourth floor from the fifth. The store is topped by a modillioned limestone cornice.

4. Structural systems, framing: The brick walls are steel-framed. The floor system is reinforced concrete.
 5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Originally there were three entrances on Washington Street. They were covered by iron marquees suspended by chains from the building.
 - b. Windows: Originally covered by striped awnings, the ground-floor show windows are divided in half by a metal mullion, with four small windows topping the large show windows. The second-, third- and fourth-story one-over-one-light sash windows are tripartite; the fourth-story windows are topped by limestone lintels and keystones. The fifth-story one-over-one-light sash are grouped in three, with brick muntins; the fifth-story windows are the same on all three public facades. The second-, third-, and fourth-story windows on the side facades are tripartite, one-over-one-light sash; the fourth-story sash have limestone lintels and keystones.
 6. Roof:
 - a. Shape: Flat roof.
 - b. Cornice: The modillioned cornice is made of limestone.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plans: All floors were rectangular, each broken up into different departments. Elevators, bathrooms, offices, and service functions were in the rear of the store. The main floor featured two central, perpendicular aisles, which crossed in the middle of the store. A description of departments at the time of the grand opening is included in the supplemental-information section. The floor-to-floor heights are 18'-5" at the first story, 14'-4" at the second through fourth stories, and 12'-0" at the fifth story.
 2. Stairways: There was a "grand staircase" in the center of the store; the first landing of the stairway was the mezzanine level.
 3. Flooring: White maple throughout.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Ivory-colored plaster.
 5. Decorative features: Most of the woodwork and display cases were made of hand-rubbed oak. In the jewelry department the furnishings were mahogany, plate glass, and onyx; so were the fixtures in the ladies coats, suits, and millinery department.

Structural columns throughout the store were decorated; the ones on the ground floor were sheathed in marble with Ionic detailing.

6. Mechanical equipment: In 1955 an air-conditioning system was installed on the roof, which required erecting a 50' x 50' x 50' structure to house the equipment. A 40' x 15' x 20' water cooler was also erected on the roof for the air-conditioning system.
 7. Lighting: When the store opened, it advertised that it was a "perfectly daylight store," employing over "4,000 arc and incandescent lights to illuminate it at night, making it the best-lighted store in the State." (Souvenir Store Brochure, 1908)
 8. Elevators: Otis elevators were original to the store.
- D. Site: Each of the four stores on this site has faced south, with its main entrance on Washington Street. The site has always been a busy commercial district, with the Cambria Iron Company offices next door, and the Johnstown library and shops and hotels across the street.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: 1919 site plan, included with field records. Obtained from Penn Traffic Company.
- B. Early views: The Johnstown Flood Museum has a file on the Penn Traffic Building, including photographs gathered over the years from the erection of the Stiles, Allen and Company store to the Penn Traffic Company store in the 1960s.
- C. Bibliography:
 1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Brochures and speeches from Penn Traffic Co. event, located in Johnstown Flood Museum.

Brown, Sharon. "Historic Resource Study: Cambria Iron Company, America's Industrial Heritage Project," draft, September 1987.

Shappee, Nathan Daniel Shappee. "A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood of 1889: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation." Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1940, 94-95.
 2. Secondary and published sources:

Hendrickson, Robert. The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History

of America's Great Department Stores. New York: Stein and Day, 1979.

Johnstown Tribune, 5 March 1908; 18 April 1953.

McCormick, S.B. A Sketch of Johnstown and Suburbs, and the Cambria Iron Works. Pittsburgh: Barr and Myers, 1867, 17-23.

New York Industrial Recorder, 1907.

The Observer, 12 September 1952.

"Today in Penelec," newsletter published by Pennsylvania Electric Company, volume 11, number 3, May-June 1955.

Yarnell, Elizabeth Biddle. Addison Hutton, Quaker Architect, 1834-1916. Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1974.

D. Supplemental Material:

Layout of floors when the store opened on March 5, 1908:

Basement: toys, woodenware, lamps, home furnishings, phonographs, talking machines, stove, paints, oils, glass and builders' supplies.

First Floor: dry goods, notions, blankets, comforts, household and table linens, dress patterns, books, stationery, law and office supplies, jewelry and fine arts, photograph materials and outfits, men's furnishings, hosiery, gloves, corsets, women's neckwear, soda fountain, confectionery, shoes, sporting goods, meat and provision department, credit and general offices, cashier's office.

Second Floor: millinery and furs, women's, misses' and children's suits, coats, men's and boy's clothing, underwear, hats, grocery and green goods market, shipping room and refrigerating coolers.

Third Floor: offices, picture department, wall paper and wall hangings, carpets, rugs, floor coverings of all kinds, upholsteries, sewing machines, furniture.

Fourth Floor: advertising department, window decorating and interior trims, amusement or banquet hall.

Fifth Floor: stock rooms, receiving rooms, private telephone exchange to all departments.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Johnstown,

Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP). An overview of history of the city (HABS No. PA-5669) provides context for the neighborhoods. See additional HABS reports on buildings in the downtown and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Terri Hartman in August 1988 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian, and Kim E. Wallace, the supervisory historian of the project. Hartman's and other project historians' work was published as The Character of a Steel Mill City: Four Historic Neighborhoods of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1989), edited by Kim E. Wallace. Illustrations in the publication include large format photographs taken by HAER photographer Jet Lowe and 35 mm photographs taken by the project historians.